Apollo

Experimental Jetset (EJ)

Experimental Jetset is a Dutch graphic design studio consisting of Marieke Stolk, Erwin Brinkers, and Danny van den Dungen. The members of the studio are, at their core, fans. As a result, their work often feels like an homage to their obsessions, from punk to Provo, Beatles to Bauhaus, all filtered through their iconic typographic voice. In 2016 the studio made their John & Paul & Ringo & George T-shirt, sparking a wildfire of remakes, covers, parodies, and bootlegs, and creating what is perhaps the first graphic design meme. In another series of works, the studio reinterpreted a piece by Ellsworth Kelly using album covers in one instance, and in another A4 sheets of paper that eventually were bound into a book. The projects demonstrate how different "versions" of an idea can travel through culture, changing but also staying the same. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

BS: As a design studio that seems very invested in punk, anarchist, and activist movements, I'm curious how you define bootlegging. In what ways do you see bootlegging connected to these interests?

EJ: What makes the term "bootlegging" interesting in the first place is perhaps the very fact that its definition is so open and ambiguous. If the origin of the word indeed comes from the practice and culture of smuggling (carrying contraband in the leg of your boot—hence, "bootleg"), then it's not far-fetched to say that the word "bootleg" itself is a bootleg—a term that can carry multiple definitions, a device that can be used to smuggle opposite meanings from one place to another. It's a word with porous borders—ideal for trespassers like us.

So it's a fascinating term. However, it's not a word we use very often in our own practice. In cases in which we explicitly referred to existing work (as facsimile, as re-enactment, or as citation), we sometimes used the word "cover version," which is a term we like very much as well, referring to the idea of rock bands covering songs by other bands, as tribute or homage. For example, the subtitle of our work *Kelly 1:1* from 2002 (in which we recreated a painting by Ellsworth Kelly) was indeed *A Cover Version*.

What we like about the notion of the "cover version" is that whole tension between the "standard" and the "variation"—the idea that a standardized format can still serve as a platform for subversive accents and critical dialects. We talked a bit about cover versions (and the standard/variation dialectic) in a conversation we had with Metahaven a while ago, in the October 2011 issue of *Print Magazine*.[1]

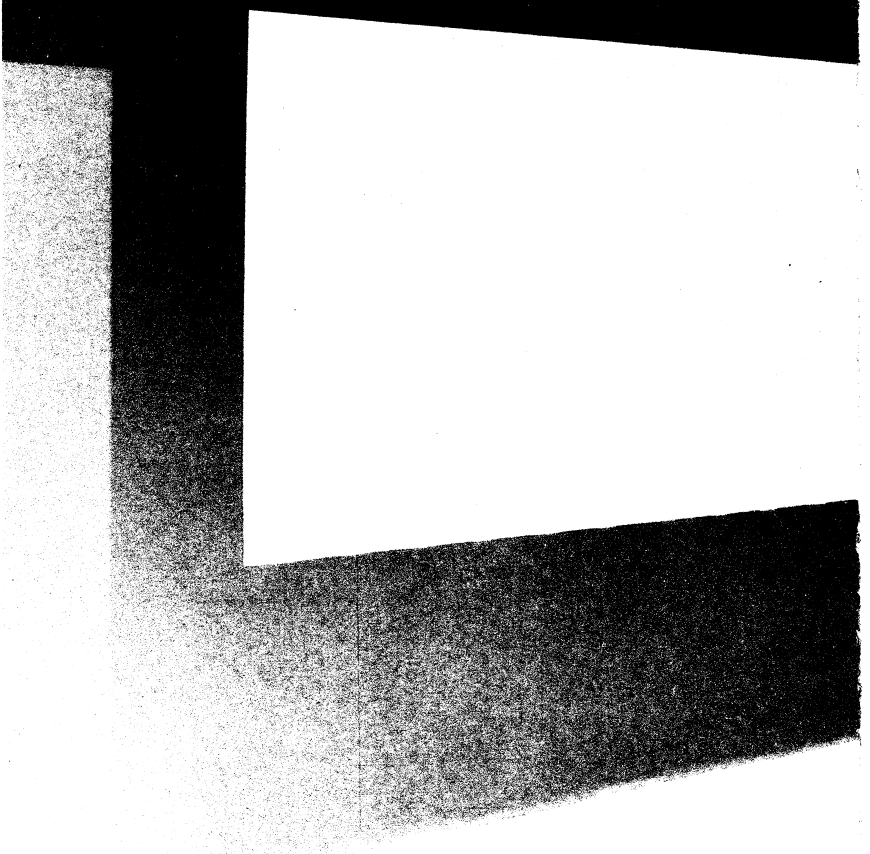
Returning to the word "bootlegging," and contemplating some of the given definitions, it's interesting that the notion of bootlegging as the "counterfeit reproduction of luxury goods" almost seems to touch on the very root of graphic design: the printing of the bible by Johannes Gutenberg, circa 1450.

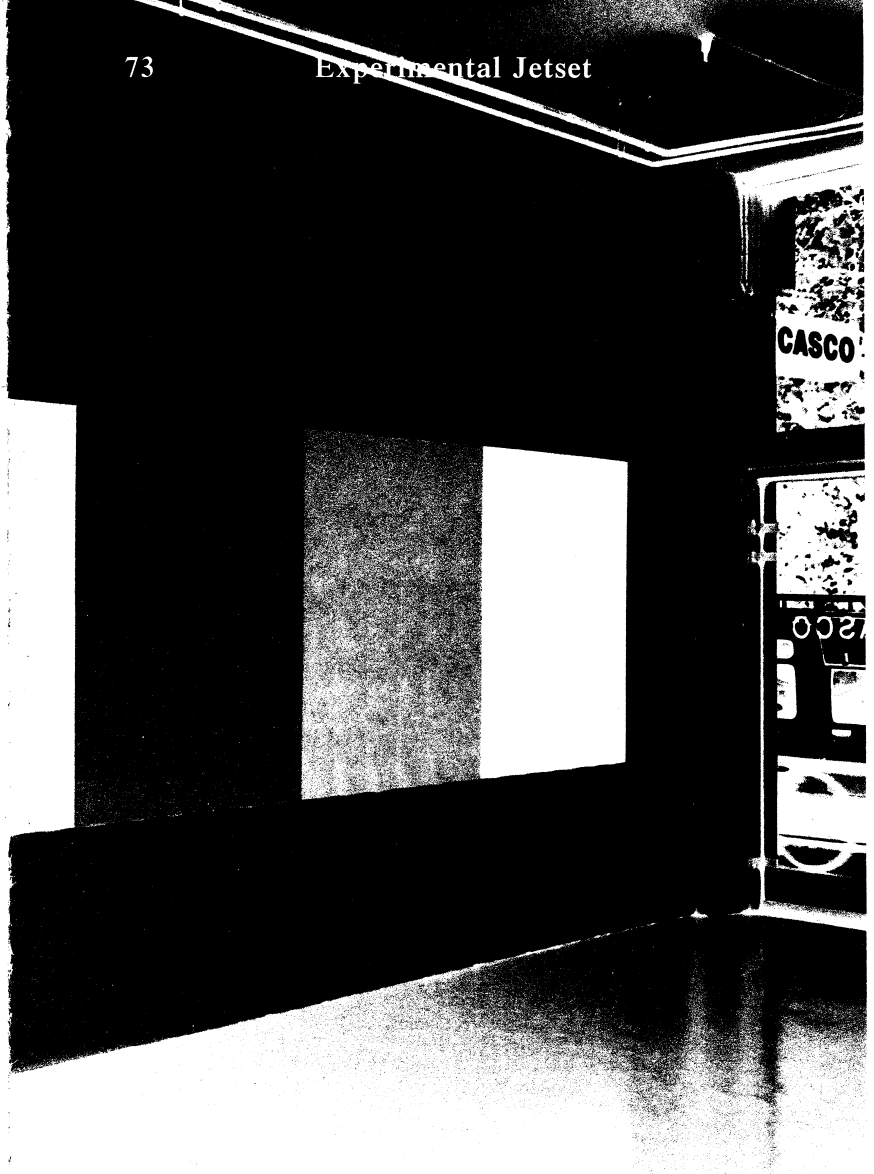
Of course, before Gutenberg, bibles used to be "luxury goods"—unique pieces, calligraphed by monks, owned by the church, and kept away (at safe distance) from the peasants. Gutenberg broke that spell by basically bootlegging the bible, making it (more or less) available to the common people—thereby destabilizing the Catholic empire, fueling both reformation and renaissance, causing major revolutions and upheavals throughout Europe. Speaking of Gutenberg, we have always been admirers of Régis Debray's 2007 essay "Socialism and Print"[2] (originally published by *New Left Review*, currently to be found online under the title "Socialism: A Life-Cycle"), in which Debray refers to the invention of the printing press as the start of the "graphosphere," that dizzying amalgamation of modernism and socialism, in which graphic workers (from printers to typographers) played such an important role.

Of course, the invention of the printing press can also be seen as the dawn of modern capitalism—after all, the printed book was the first-ever mass-produced product.In that sense, the birth of the printing industry (and thus of graphic design) already carries in itself that beautiful paradox that also can be found in the current practice of bootlegging—that electrifying tension between emancipation and exploitation.

Taking it back to the historical origin of the word, and the culture of smuggling, contrabandism, illegal trespassing, et cetera, it's interesting to see that the current practice of bootlegging often involves smuggling as well: carrying information from one sphere to another, crossing borders between "high culture" and "low culture," between the subcultural and the

pp. 72–73: Experimental Jetset, *Kelly 1:1* (2002)

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mainstream, between academic culture and working-class culture, et cetera. Because of its roots in smuggling, bootlegging will always be regarded as slightly illegal, immoral, vulgar.

And this metaphor of smuggling goes for graphic design as well. After all, what is graphic design but the practice of pushing materialized information from one sphere to another, forever crossing the porous borders between art and industry, between poetry and pornography, between pop and politics?- Graphic design is a practice that was born in the vague borderlands between disparate disciplines, so trespassing feels natural to us. Graphic designers are bootleggers, forgers, smugglers—and because of that, graphic design will always be regarded as a slightly clandestine discipline, as a lumpen-activity, as a practice without any real morals (other than the proverbial "honor among thieves"). And that's exactly what makes graphic design such a relevant force in culture, we think.

On a completely different note, one other aspect that is quite striking about the practice of bootlegging is its archiving function. To bootleg is to archive. This was already true in the era of bootleg records—albums that often contained illegally-taped concerts of rock bands, thus creating alternative archives (and parallel canons) of those bands.

But this archivist dimension can also be found in more current examples of bootlegging. In that regard, we should mention Kevin McCaughey's ongoing Boot Boyz Biz project and the way in which McCaughey uses the medium of T-shirts to document crucial moments in (sub)cultural history. It really is an archive made of cotton.In fact, in an old interview from 2008, we (briefly) mentioned exactly this idea:

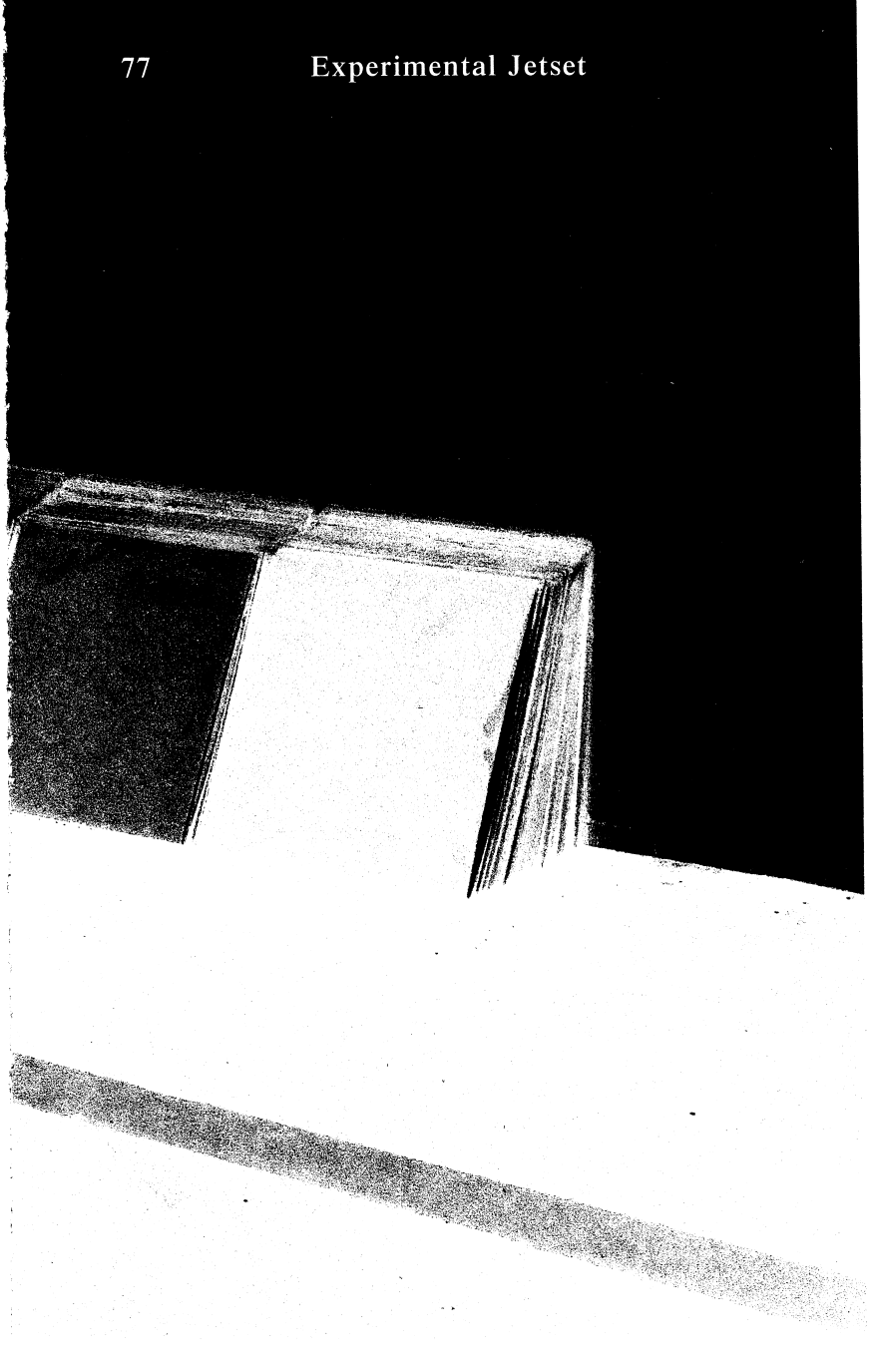
the potential of a T-shirt to function as a social-democratic archive, as a manifestation of living memory.

> BS: In your vast body of work, I'm curious what projects might come to mind when speaking about bootlegging?

EJ: We already mentioned *Kelly 1:1*, an installation (and publication) we made in 2002, in which we recreated an iconic painting by Ellsworth Kelly, using 150 A4-sized sheets of colored paper. By copying (in a low-fi, low-tech, low-res way) an archetypical painting by Kelly, we tried to transform the function of a particular space; a site-specific intervention, in short. Also, by turning those 150 sheets into a publication as well, we hoped to reflect on the relationship between "the original" and "the copy"—and the role of graphic design therein. Most of all, it was a tribute to Ellsworth Kelly (in that sense, it truly was a "cover version"), so we were very flattered to learn that, in 2003, Kelly bought five copies of the publication, through Printed Matter in New York. (First we were slightly nervous that those five copies would be sent straight to his lawyers, for legal matters, but luckily we never heard from them). We later revisited *Kelly 1:1* a couple of times. For example, in 2007, we translated the same Ellsworth Kelly painting into 100 monochrome 12-inch record sleeves (for 'Ultramoderne,' a group exhibition on the relationship between modernism and pop-culture).

Another project in which we explicitly referred to existing work was *Zang Tumb Tumb (If You Want It)*, a print we created in 2003. In that piece, we tried

pp. 76–77: Experimental Jetset, *Kelly 1:1* (2007)

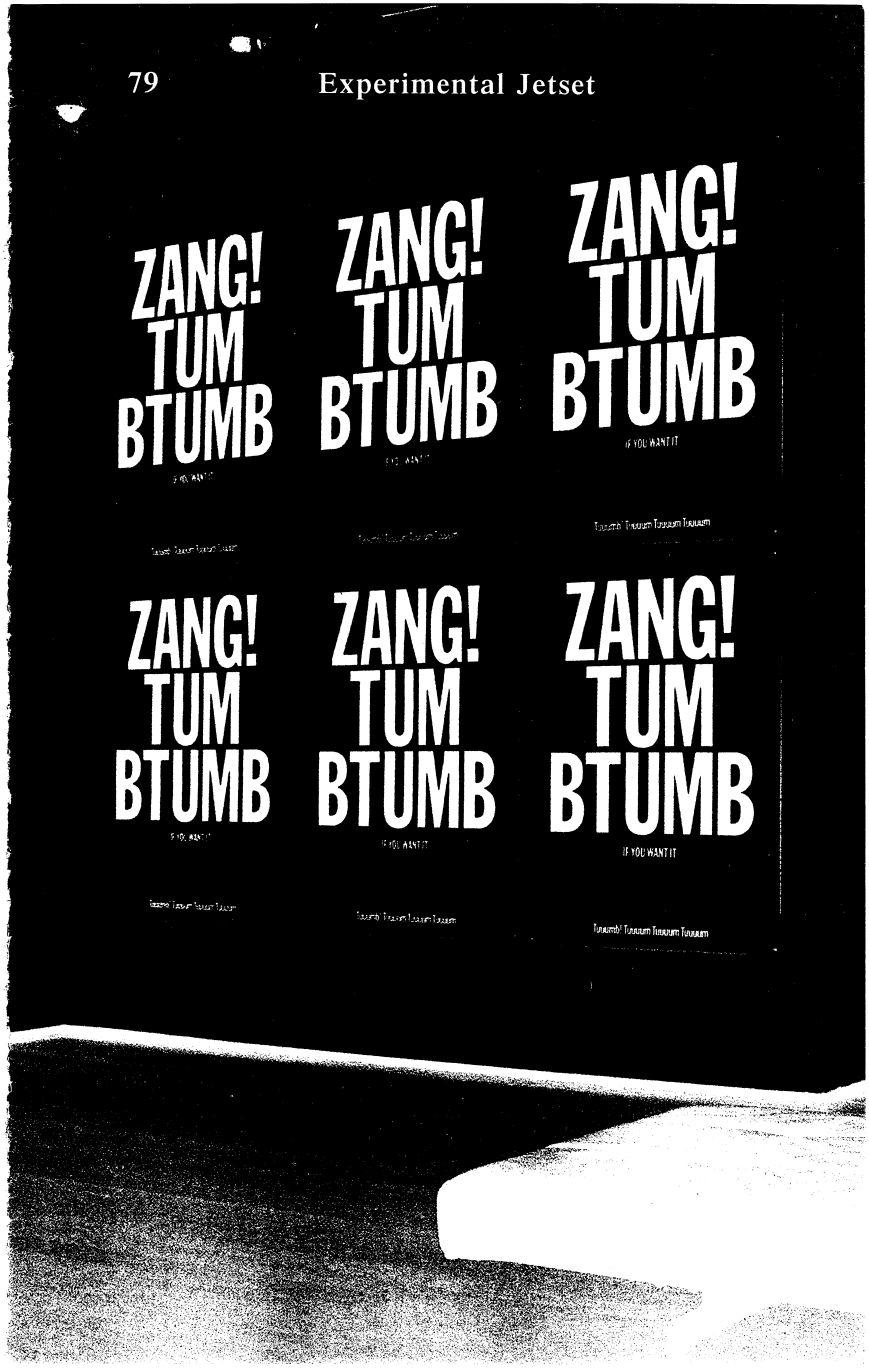


to synthesize two seemingly contrasting forces within modernism: Futurism and Fluxus. In fact, a lot of our work revolves around this theme, trying to reflect on the plurality within modernism, treating it not as a static monolithic movement but, rather, as a maelstrom of conflicting accents and dialects. (Actually, in the poster, we also referred to yet another strand of modernism: post-punk. After all, Zang Tumb Tumb was also the record label of Frankie Goes to Hollywood—but that's another story, for another time). A couple of years later, we were invited to transform this poster into a mural, during the group exhibition 'Ecstatic Alphabets / Heaps of Language' (MoMA, 2012).

A very similar project (attempting to synthesize two seemingly opposite strands of modernism) can be found in *Dark Side of the Bauhaus* (2003), a series of three record sleeves in which we referred to both the famous Pink Floyd album cover (originally designed by Hipgnosis in 1973), and the historical "square/triangle/circle" emblem of the Bauhaus school. Again, a way to pay tribute to two of our main influences, early modernism and psychedelic pop culture.What's interesting about *Dark Side of the Bauhaus* is the fact that a couple of years later, our friend Mark Owens (of Life of the Mind) bootlegged this bootleg—by giving the Germs' iconic *G.I.* sleeve the Bauhaus treatment as well (for his 2006 essay "Graphics Incognito"), thus creating a sort of "meta-bootleg."

One last example we would like to mention is the facsimile we created in 2011, reproducing the first issue of *Provo* (originally published in 1965), a facsimile that was part of 'Two or Three Things I

p. 79: Experimental Jetset, *Zang Tumb Tumb (If You Want It)* (2003)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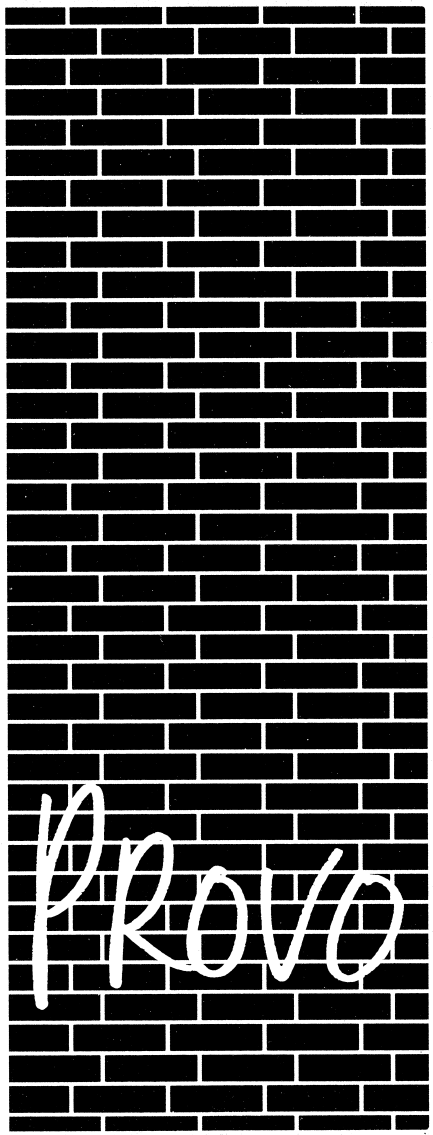
PROVO

Know About Provo,' an exhibition we curated in the beginning of 2011 for W139, an art space in Amsterdam. In short, *Provo* was a monthly magazine published by the Provo movement, an anarchist group active in Amsterdam from 1965 to 1967. Of the 500 copies printed of the first issue, 400 were immediately confiscated by the police (this all took place in July 1965), so only 100 copies of the original first issue remained. In order to fill up this historical gap, we decided to reprint the missing 400 copies. It really was a labor of love to carefully recreate this publication—and we're still very proud of this facsimile.In fact, because the facsimile is so faithfully reproduced (and because the original is almost impossible to obtain), some institutions and archives have actually acquired our facsimile for their collections. For example, when the Walker Art Center showed a full series of *Provo* (during the 'Hippie Modernism' exhibition of 2015–2016), the first issue was actually our facsimile. Also, when the Van Abbe Museum showed the full Provo Series (in 2013), the first issue was our facsimile as well. Again, it shows the archivist potential of bootlegging.

> BS: I often think of your &&& shirt as the first graphic design meme. It's spawned a seemingly infinite amount of bootlegs taken into worlds as diverse as LA gangster rap ('Dre & Eazy & Cube & Ren.') to hit TV sitcoms ('Jerry & George & Cosmo & Elaine.'). How did it feel to be on the other side of the bootleg, from the "bootlegger," to the "bootlegged?"

p. 80: Experimental Jetset, *Provo Magazine*, facsimile (2011)

EJ: Of course, when we created the &&& shirt (in itself quite a hermetic, esoteric piece, revolving around themes such as self-referentiality, iconoclasm, abstraction, et cetera.), we had no idea it would be copied on such a massive scale. We had no idea it would be copied at all. But we are actually quite humbled by it.

Fact is, we are very much the products of fanzine culture: all three of us come from a post-punk/DIY background. So to see all these people using the &&& format as a platform for fandom—as a low-fi way to announce their love for bands, teams, groups, collectives, political causes—most of the time (with only a few exceptions) that's quite a thrill to behold. It reminds us of that famous punk-rock diagram: "this is a chord / this is another / this is a third... now form a band." In a way, that's exactly how the &&& format works: "this is an ampersand / this is another / this is a third... now make a shirt."

BS: You mentioned your *Provo* facsimile. I'm know you're connected to this movement both as researchers and personally (with Marieke's parents a part of the movement). Given your appreciation for these sorts of activist movements, I wonder in what way you see bootlegging as a political gesture?

EJ: We're of the school of thought that regards copying as an intrinsically political act. Multiplying, printing, publishing—it always signifies a movement from the individual to the collective, from solitude to multitude, from one to many. In that sense, we still believe (foolishly, perhaps) that graphic design is an inherently social-democratic practice. Even when subjected to the most neoliberal circumstances, even

when used for the most capitalist causes, we still maintain that, at its very core, graphic design has a social-democratic dimension.

The same goes for bootlegging. We believe that the contrabandist nature of bootlegging (smuggling information from one sphere to another) is ultimately a progressive impulse — even when the intentions of the bootlegger are far from progressive. After all, we see culture as a maelstrom of conflicting ideas, a model we borrowed from the late, great philosopher Marshall Berman:

> *To be modern is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air.To be a modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one's own, to move within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows.*

So we do feel that culture (at large) benefits from being constantly contaminated with other ideas, coming from all kinds of different spheres — turning society into an ever-accelerating maelstrom of clashing ideas. And then we hope (we know, we are being quite hopeful here) that, somehow, out of this dialectical "cold fusion" — like collision, new ideas will

pp. 84–85: Various fan bootlegs of the &&& T-shirt originally designed by Experimental Jetset (2001)

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Lettuce&
Tomato&
Bacon
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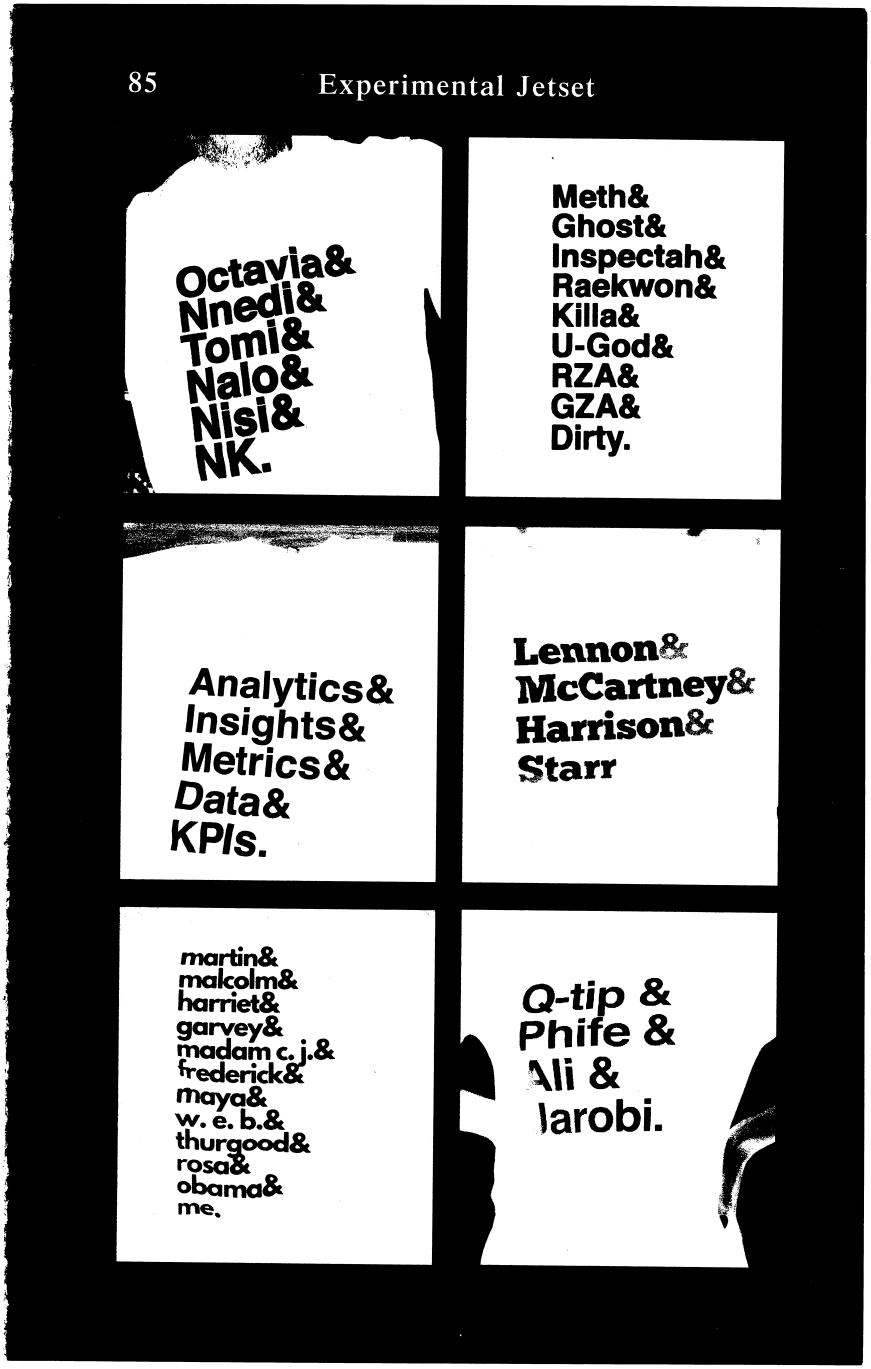
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appear, better ideas, more progressive ideas, socialist ideas. Speaking of contamination, the following words by Boris Groys (from his book *In the Flow*) seem quite relevant as well:

> *Modernism is a history of infections; by political movements, by pop-culture and consumerism ... Openness is an essential characteristic of the modernist inheritance, and that inheritance is the will to reveal the Other within oneself, to become Other, to become infected by Otherness.*

Ultimately, we think that's the progressive, modernist potential of both bootlegging and graphic design: to keep the boundaries porous; to keep contaminating culture; and to keep trespassing, crossing the borders between "high culture"' and "low," between the subcultural and the mainstream, between academic culture and working-class culture, et cetera.

To give a very personal example: as working-class teens, growing up in non-academic surroundings, it was through subcultures such as punk and new wave that we first learned about movements such as Surrealism, Futurism, and Dada. In that sense, post-punk was a form of education for us. If it wasn't for people such as Malcolm McLaren and Jamie Reid (who basically "bootlegged" avant-garde principles, liberated these ideas from the academic sphere, and pushed them into the mainstream through punk and new wave), we would have probably never heard about the Lettrists and the Situationists. We talk a bit about these dynamics in a 2016 interview for *It's Nice That*.

Maybe McLaren's motives were indeed exploitative, opportunistic, and irresponsible. But in the

end, the role he fulfilled was totally progressive. He took information from the academic sphere, and spread these ideas around (through record sleeves, through T-shirts, through commercial products), thereby educating tens of thousands of working-class teenage kids (like us), inspiring them to go to art school, to become artists, designers, poets (which goes to show a bootlegs educational dimension).

Bootleggers (and thus graphic designers) are gate-crashers rather than gatekeepers. The bootleg (in fact, the printed object in general) is a total social mobility machine, puncturing straight through all social layers and economic classes, distributing information and aesthetics in a collectivist, egalitarian, almost jacobine way. Smuggling is the great equalizer. Of course, the intentions of smugglers won't always be so noble. Sometimes their motives might be crassly commercial, grossly opportunistic, downright exploitative (to speak with Malcolm McLaren: "cash from chaos").

But despite all this, we do believe in the progressive potential of the act of smuggling itself. And that's also how we regard bootlegging, and graphic design — as practices that might be driven by opportunistic motives, but that are ultimately progressive.

Title page (p. 68): Writing taken from Experimental Jetset's *Provo Magazine* facsimile (2011)